

Hello and welcome back. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we are going to talk about something that is worth a lot of money, and it is buried in the ground. We're not exactly going on a treasure hunt, but I think you will have fun.

Then we will hear about a United Nations study about food. We all know that there is a lot of hunger in the world. The information we have today may change what you do with the food on your table.

On your radio, or on your computer or smart phone ...this is **As It Is**, a program to help you learn and improve your American English, from VOA.

Scientists say that a very large amount of something of great value may be hidden away in an unlikely place. A recent study shows that the world's largest source of rare earth elements may be in North Korea. And, a company based in the British Virgin Islands has signed a joint agreement to look for those elements.

Observers say this could change the rare earths market and politics in Northeast Asia. But they say this could happen only if North Korea is willing to make reforms.

A geological study shows that North Korea could hold some 216 million tons of rare earths. These minerals are used in electronics like smart phones and high-definition televisions. If the study proves true, the results would increase the known sources of rare earths in the world by 100 percent.

The private company SRE Minerals Limited announced results of the study in December. The company also announced a 25-year deal to develop the deposits in Jongju, northwest of the North Korean capital, Pyongyang.

The joint project is called Pacific Century Rare Earth Mineral Limited. It will work with the Korea Natural Resources Trading Corporation, owned by the North Korean government.

Scott Bruce is with the East-West Center in Hawaii. He says the deposits affect China's hold on the market. And he says they also could improve North Korea's relations with Japan and South Korea. Those countries are among the biggest importers of the minerals.

"If North Korea was able to launch this program and develop its own industry it could potentially leverage them to integrate with its neighbors and no longer be the black hole in the center of northeast Asia."

For years, North Korea's mineral wealth has been estimated to be worth trillions of dollars. The Jongju activity could be the first to use its rare earths. But huge problems block the way.

Companies doing business in North Korea must deal with a secretive government. The country has poor roads and undependable energy supplies. Such conditions would add to the difficulty of the expensive business of mining rare earths.

Even if the partners succeed in getting the minerals out of the ground, experts say limitations placed by the U.S. and the U.N. present problems.

Mr. Bruce says foreign mining companies have to include these costs along with political threats in their planning.

“The last company that went in big in the North was of course South Korea during the Sunshine Policy. And you had KORES, the Korean resource group that invested heavily in a few joint mineral projects in the North.”

He says the group lost all news of what was happening in those mines when relations between the Koreas worsened.

Pacific Century will build a rare earths processing center in Jongju.

North Korea's working conditions include forced labor. That could place foreign companies in danger of being charged with human rights abuses. Pacific Century says it is an honest mining company with controls in place to make sure it honors international standards.

Leonid Petrov is a Korean studies researcher at the Australian National Studies University's College of Asia and the Pacific. He says North Korea has no interest in reforming the economy to meet world regulations for foreign investment.

"The two conditions of its survival, the constant crisis and the isolation which are needed for the maintenance of the regime would be jeopardized. Something like that already happened during the 10 years of Sunshine Policy, when South Korea-North Korea started trading, cooperating. Some exchange was going on. But soon they realized, for South Korea it was too expensive. For North Korea, it was too dangerous."

The U.S. Geological Survey says it does not have enough information to comment on the announcement of the finding of the elements in North Korea.

U.N. Says Much Food Is Wasted

We all know that many people around the world go to bed hungry every night. But did you know that that between 30 and 40 percent of the food in the United States and most wealthy countries is thrown away every year? Christopher Cruise joins us with more.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization says more than a billion tons of food is wasted each year. Much of that waste happens in wealthy nations, but it happens in developing countries as well. Even as all this food is being wasted, it is estimated that one billion people are undernourished, and hundreds of millions of people go to sleep hungry each day.

Danielle Nierenberg is the co-founder and president of Food Tank, an organization that studies food issues.

“A lot of people in the world -- one out of eight people -- are hungry. And at the same time we have about 1.5 billion people who are obese. So, that excess has consequences not just on our waistlines, but on the environment, on food security and a whole range of other factors.”

Ms. Nierenberg says much of the food waste in the developing world is caused by poor infrastructure, like bad roads and storage areas that are too small. In wealthy nations, people are to blame because they buy more than they can eat. Ms. Nierenberg also blames dates that are printed on food containers. These dates tell buyers and sellers what date the food should be sold or eaten by. She says these dates cause people to throw away food too soon.

VOA spoke with Ms. Nierenberg when she was in Milan, Italy. She was attending the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition yearly meeting. Officials at the meeting released what they call the Milan Protocol. The document calls on international leaders and policymakers to improve food security.

“It not only focuses on food waste, but creating better and more-sustainable agriculture systems, as well as focusing on unhealthy lifestyles -- and really helping reduce the epidemic of obesity and overweight that is plaguing not just rich countries, but poor countries as well.”

Ms. Nierenberg says the amount of food wasted each year shows there is already enough food to feed the planet.

“The problem of hunger in the world is not one of not having enough food. We produce more than enough food for every man, woman and child to eat every day. Yet, it’s political reasons. It’s poverty, certainly, that prevents food from getting to people who need it the most.”



I'm Christopher Cruise. And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington.
There are more Learning English programs straight ahead, and
world news follows at the beginning of the hour on VOA.

